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Violent Resistance as Radical Choice

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Abstract

What reasons stand in favor of (or against) violent resistance to oppression? I distinguish two kinds of normative reasons that bear relevantly in such a practical deliberation. I argue that in addition to reasons of impartial morality, victims' personal projects and relationships may also provide reasons for (or against) violent resistance. Moreover, there is no guarantee that conflicts will not occur between such reasons. Thus, some acts of violent resistance may arise from situations of radical choice in which impartial moral reasons and personal reasons pull the agent in opposite directions. Regardless of what we ultimately think agents facing such decisions ought to do, all things considered, recognizing such conflicts is crucial for understanding the circumstances that give rise to violence and for better sympathizing with victims who are pushed to such extreme modes of resistance.

Keywords: resistance, oppression, violence, nonviolence, radical choice, partiality, impartiality, morality, ethical theory, moral reasons

1. Introduction

Violence is a pervasive feature of life under oppression. In racist patriarchal societies, violence is used to deny basic rights and freedoms, enforce submission to oppressive practices, and punish those who challenge or disobey the dominant norms. Victims' ability to effectively resist such treatment is severely limited by their oppression. Sometimes options for resistance are so constrained that using violence becomes a relevant option. Victims may physically fight back against the harms they suffer, meeting oppressive violence with violent resistance.

For those who are victims of oppression, what reasons, if any, stand in favor of, or against, engaging in violent resistance? Do these reasons conflict with one another, thus leading to special ethical conflicts when resisting oppression? If so, how do these conflicts affect our ethical evaluations of violent resistance?

Current discourse on violent resistance tends to focus on violence used by groups as a means of achieving political goals or in self-defense. Moreover, it centers what I will call *paradigmatic moral reasons* for or against the use of violence—that is, reasons that arise from impartial moral principles. There is excellent work being done, for instance, to show how violent protest may advance worthy moral aims in society and, when properly targeted and restrained, may even satisfy citizens' moral and political duties.[1]

This paper aims to expand on such work by addressing violence as it might be used by individuals (rather than groups or political factions) as well as the personal reasons that these individuals may have for such actions. More specifically, I argue that, in addition to impartial moral principles, the personal projects and relationships of those who are oppressed may provide reasons to engage in violent resistance. Such reasons, which I call "personal reasons," come apart from and are not always reducible to paradigmatic moral reasons. More importantly, they may even conflict with paradigmatic moral considerations. Some cases of violent resistance under oppression arise from what Wolf (2015) calls situations of "radical choice," in which impartial reasons and one's personal projects come into conflict. Thus, even if violent resistance in any given case violates paradigmatic moral reasons or constraints, this does not settle the question of its ethical value (at least not without further argument). Moreover, the cases I will discuss show that radical choice can arise from and can even be exacerbated by structural oppression. For victims facing a radical choice regarding whether to engage in violent resistance, circumstances of oppression may help to explain why violence becomes one of the few relevant options (or perhaps the only relevant option) for resistance.

Violent resistance is an undoubtedly complex phenomenon. The question of what circumstances give rise to it does not lend itself to easy or definitive answers. My aim here is not to simplify our understanding of the reasons that bear relevantly on deliberations about violent resistance. Nor is it my aim to provide a way of resolving conflicts of radical choice that may arise in such deliberations. Instead, my aim is to draw out the ethical complexities that are involved in violent resistance. By highlighting these complexities in the conversation about (non)violence, my hope is to enhance our ethical understanding of violent resistance and the people who engage in it. Not only is such an understanding crucial for better and more accurate theorizing about violent resistance and the circumstances that give rise to it, but it may also allow us to better sympathize with the individuals who are pushed to such extremes. This is not to suggest that sympathy is guaranteed to be the correct response to such actions. Determining whether and on what conditions sympathy is the right response would require further argument. Nevertheless, the considerations that I will discuss reveal ethical complexities surrounding violent resistance that would be relevant to arriving at such judgments.

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[1] See especially Betz (2020), Delmas (2018), Kling and Mitchell (2019), and Pasternak (2019).

Before we begin, it will help to clarify the question I plan to address and distinguish it from other questions it might easily be confused with. The question of this paper is, what reasons, if any, count in favor of (or against) violent resistance? This is different from the question of whether one should engage in violent resistance. That is, even if we find (as I will argue) that there are sometimes reasons that count in favor of violent resistance, for all that I say it might still be true that, *all things considered*, one should not engage in it.

Likewise, the question of this paper is not whether violent resistance is admirable or praiseworthy. The mere fact that important reasons might count in favor of violent resistance does not dictate whether following such reasons makes one's conduct especially virtuous or admirable. It is not an aim of this paper to recommend or praise any particular form of resistance. To be very clear: it is not my aim to endorse violent resistance either in general or in any particular case. Instead, I will make the much weaker point that some of the normative considerations that go into the balance when deliberating about whether to engage in violent resistance are personal reasons, and that such reasons are not guaranteed to cohere with the paradigmatic reasons of impartial morality. My aim is, in other words, to elucidate some of the *pro tanto* normative reasons for violent resistance that arise from individuals' personal projects and relationships.

Why should we address this weaker question about the *pro tanto* reasons that might favor violent resistance? Aren't the important questions whether violent resistance is justified, all things considered, or whether such actions exemplify virtue? There are at least two reasons why it is worth taking up the weaker question. First, judging whether an agent acted virtuously or justifiably will require careful consideration of the *pro tanto* reasons that favor her actions, and how she weighs and balances them in practical deliberation. Second, failing to consider the variety of reasons for violent resistance, including those that may be less ideal than standard moral reasons, can easily lead to distortions or misapprehensions of actual cases. Thus, although this paper has a weaker aim, it is nonetheless a crucial one for addressing the more ambitious questions.

It is also important to note that, as I understand them, political philosophy and moral philosophy are distinct inquiries with overlapping subject matter. Political philosophy is concerned with the just organization of society, such as its laws and institutions, as well as the obligations that states and citizens owe to each other. Morality is fundamentally concerned with treating all people as deserving of respect and well-being and with what we owe to other people in virtue of our shared moral status. In some cases, treating people with respect and giving them what they are owed requires contributing to justice and equality in society at large. Thus, although justice and equality are specifically political values and the major topics of political philosophy, they are also moral concerns. In short, political values are a subset of moral values. When I treat morality and politics as distinct in the paper, the reader should bear in mind that I nonetheless view them as overlapping in that moral considerations also include political values such as justice and equality.

The paper proceeds as follows. In section 2 I define violent resistance, identify the range of acts of violent resistance that I will focus on, and distinguish such actions from self-defense. In section 3, I consider the paradigmatic moral reasons for violent resistance, surveying various examples from recent literature on the moral justifiability of violent protest and disobedience. In section 4, I argue that in addition to impartial moral values and principles, victims' personal projects and relationships may also provide reasons to engage in violent resistance. I illustrate some of these personal reasons through examples of three women who physically fought back against racist or sexist oppression. In section 5, I argue that accepting a distinction between paradigmatic moral reasons and personal reasons allows us to recognize that conflicts may naturally occur between such reasons in practice. Thus, I suggest that some cases of violent resistance may arise from circumstances of radical choice, in which impartial reasons and one's personal projects pull in opposite directions. We cannot appreciate the ethical complexities surrounding violent resistance without recognizing such conflicts and carefully attending to how they may affect our evaluations of specific cases. Finally, I raise the question of how we should judge people who engage in violent resistance when it is not supported by impartial reasons. With no intention of defending a specific answer, I briefly sketch three natural responses that arise from the conflict in reasons I have highlighted throughout.

2. Violent Resistance and Self-Defense

Before beginning our discussion, it will help to define violent resistance, identify the scope of violent actions that are the focus of this paper, and explain how such actions differ from paradigmatic cases of self-defense. To be clear, the aim of this paper is to address the normative question of what reasons stand in favor of or against engaging in violent resistance for victims of oppression, not the classificatory question of what actions count as violent resistance. In this section I will provide (rather than argue for) an assumed working definition of violent resistance, one which relies on definitions of "violence," "resistance," and "self-defense" that are either defended by other authors or assumed in US criminal law. It is important to note that the definitions of these concepts are a matter of controversy and ongoing debate.[2] The purpose of this section is to make as clear as possible how I am understanding the notion of violent resistance in addressing the normative question above.

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[2] See Kling and Mitchell (2019) for a survey of some of these debates.

Broadly speaking, violent resistance is an act of resistance to oppression that aims to injure people or their property. It aims to harm and overwhelm an oppressor as a way of gaining power or exacting retribution for oppressive treatment. As a form of violence, it inflicts physical harm, often through force or coercion.[3] As a form of resistance, it is a response to oppression and makes its agent vulnerable to oppression-related backlash (Fakhoury 2021, 411). Thus, violent resistance is qualitatively different from initiating violence against innocent people or those who have done nothing to perpetuate oppression because it is a response to oppressive treatment.

Violent resistance is importantly different from self-defense. This is in large part because of its distinctive aims. For my purposes, self-defense is a matter of protecting oneself by averting or counteracting a harm using a necessary degree of force. In United States criminal law, for instance, for an action to count as self-defense, the force used must be "necessary to prevent . . . *unlawful* and *immediate* violence from another" (Dix 2016, 124). Moreover, there must be good reason for the agent to believe "that the harm would be inflicted immediately if she did not act in self-defense" (Dix 2016, 124). Thus, when one defends oneself, one aims primarily to prevent imminent harm as a means of self-preservation. By contrast, violent resistance aims at harming and overwhelming an oppressor as a way of gaining power or exacting retribution. Where self-defense aims to counter or deactivate the oppressor and preserve and shield the victim, violent resistance aims to punish or coerce the oppressor and empower the victim. Thus, because its aims go beyond self-preservation, violent resistance may use greater force than that which is necessary to merely counteract or eliminate a threat. Moreover, unlike in standard cases of self-defense, the harm that an act of violent resistance responds to may not be imminent.[4] For instance, violent resistance may be used as a form of payback for an oppressive harm that has passed.

Despite their apparent differences, there may be cases where the aims of self-defense and the aims of violent resistance overlap or may not be easily differentiated. Sometimes eliminating a threat requires overwhelming an oppressor or exacting retribution—the threat will not be countered by any other means. Moreover, when oppression targets victims' lives, such as under circumstances of genocide or slavery, acts of self-preservation may become acts of resistance.[5] As Kautzer (2018) states, "When conditions are so oppressive that one's self is not recognized at all, self-defense is de facto insurrection, a necessary *making oneself known* through resistance." Under such circumstances, violent resistance and self-defense may not be cleanly distinguishable. Nevertheless, there are clear cases where they do come apart—where the aim of the act of violence is not to shield the agent from harm but to gain greater power, coerce an oppressor, or exact retribution.

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[3] Here I lean on Rawls's (1999, 321) understanding of violence as including "acts likely to injure and to hurt" and Singer's (1973, 83) understanding of violence as "intimidatory and coercive." However, this is not to say that *all* forms of violence are coercive or that violence is coercive by definition. There may be instances of violence that do not coerce others. For examples, see Brownlee (2004, 349).

[4] As Delmas (2018, 96) notes, in defensive harm, "violence cannot be used preemptively or indiscriminately or in response to future probably threats. Nor can it be used as a form of payback after an attack."

What makes violent resistance a form of resistance? Here I assume the conception of resistance that I defend elsewhere (Fakhoury 2019, 2021). As I argue in those papers, resistance to oppression is an action that challenges oppressive norms or behaviors and thereby makes the agent vulnerable to oppression-related backlash—that is, harm that is caused by or serves to enforce the oppression that one is resisting (Fakhoury 2021, 409–14). Resisters challenge oppressive norms with some understanding that their behavior violates or is offensive to the status quo. People may resist for a variety of different reasons, ranging from impartial considerations of justice to entirely partial considerations of love and loyalty (Fakhoury 2021, 403–4). People may resist individually or as part of a group. Moreover, they may resist different aspects of oppression, ranging from unjust laws affecting entire populations to interpersonal incidents of manipulation or control affecting only oneself or one's loved ones (Fakhoury 2019).

In the discussion that follows, I will focus on violent resistance as it might be used by individuals and on the personal reasons that these individuals may have for such actions. In the central examples of this paper, victims of racism and sexism assault men who have harmed them as a form of revenge or to seize power—and not merely as a means of self-defense. It is for such agents that I will argue violent resistance may take the form of a radical choice. Thus, my focus here differs from the focus of the dominant literature on political violence, which tends to address violence used in self-defense or as a political strategy and the impartial reasons that may support such actions. Indeed, violent resistance as discussed here is distinct from what Margaret Betz (2020, 180) calls "resistance violence," which is "a type of [political] violence that attempts to defend historically and systematically vulnerable persons in a society," such as in the slave rebellion led by Nat Turner in 1831. In the cases I will discuss, violence is not used for political ends (e.g., liberating groups or reforming institutions), and its aims go beyond those of defensive harm. Thus, although the topic at hand intersects with ongoing discussions in political philosophy

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[5] Consider for instance Jews who survived the holocaust, as discussed by Frankl (2006). A similar point is made by Lorde (1988) with respect to black women's survival in racist societies.

(such as Betz's) about the moral justifiability of political violence, the central question of this paper is an ethical one about how one should live when one is being subjected to racism and sexism in one's private life.[6]

This is not to say however that on my view violent resistance is not political. Certainly, it is political in the sense that it can affect political issues like those pertaining to the law, public consciousness, and the institutions of the state. However, the acts that I discuss are not undertaken for the purpose of impacting such political phenomena. Rather, in the cases I will discuss, violence is a response to an interpersonal conflict, and it aims primarily to uphold the individuals' personal projects within that limited context. Put simply, if violent resistance has a broader political impact, this is a side effect from the perspective of the person who is resisting. It is not the reason for which the agent acts violently.

In focusing on individual acts of violent resistance and the personal reasons victims have for engaging in them, I do not wish to deny that violent resistance may take other forms than those that I discuss. Nor do I wish to deny that the conclusion I defend may apply to other cases of violent action apart from what I have been calling violent resistance, or that radical choices of the sort I describe here may also arise for others, such as protestors, revolutionaries, or militants using violence as a political tactic. Such claims, however, will require further argument than my space here permits.

In sum, violent resistance is an action that aims to harm perpetrators of oppression in response to oppressive treatment. Its characteristic aims, which differentiate it from self-defense, are to make the oppressor suffer, to gain power, or achieve retribution. What makes violent resistance a form of resistance is that it challenges oppressive norms and comes with the risk of oppression-related backlash, such as inciting further harm from oppressors. With this working definition at hand, we are now ready to discuss the normative reasons for and against such actions.

3. Paradigmatic Moral Reasons and Violent Resistance

Let us turn to the central question of the paper: what reasons may count in favor of (or against) engaging in acts of violent resistance? I distinguish two general categories of reasons: paradigmatic moral reasons and personal reasons. Let's begin by considering the first kind.

Paradigmatic moral reasons are impartial reasons arising from commitments to abstract principles of justice and morality, such as human dignity, equality, or the collective good. They tend to be concerned with paradigmatically moral matters such as the difference between right and wrong action, the grounds and limits of our moral obligations, or protecting and promoting the equally weighted needs and interests of others in society. They are characteristically impartial and agent-neutral, applying to individuals in virtue of their shared moral status, independently of any special traits or qualities. Moreover, paradigmatic moral reasons often reflect the fact that each of us is just one person among others equally deserving of respect and well-being. Reasons of this sort are most explicitly represented in traditional moral theories such as deontology and consequentialism. Moreover, they often take the form of requirements or limitations on action—for instance, by stating a duty to respect a basic principle or to promote a certain good. Hence, when it takes the form of a requirement or limitation on action, I will refer to paradigmatic moral reasons as standard or paradigmatic "moral constraints."[7]

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[6] This central question gives special focus to what Williams (1985) takes to be the fundamental question of ethics—"How should one live?"—the answer to which need not appeal exclusively to considerations of morality, impartiality, or justice.

Paradigmatic moral reasons and constraints on the use of violence are well represented in the current literature, especially in discussions of the moral justifiability of violent protest. Some of the most commonly discussed paradigmatic moral reasons in this literature are (1) eliminating injustices in public policy and legislation, (2) effective public communication about injustice (particularly as a form of democratic participation), and (3) defense of human dignity and equality (including one's own). Let's consider each one in turn.

First, philosophers have argued that like nonviolent acts of civil disobedience, violent protest may aim to eliminate injustices from society by inciting changes in public policy and legislation. Avia Pasternak (2019, 392), for instance, argues that "political rioters act in the service of goals that are similar to those of civilly disobedient protestors" including the aim "to bring about a change of public policy that will eradicate, or in the least ameliorate, the substantive violations of justice they experience at the hands of the state." By using "shock tactics" such as "open confrontation with the police," violent protesters can draw attention to the plight of the oppressed and "wrestle concessions from policymakers" (Pasternak 2019, 393). Similarly, Candice Delmas (2018, 73) holds that principled uncivil disobedience, including some "riots . . . and vigilantism," can help to "repair or replace" unjust laws and institutions, thereby satisfying citizens' duties of justice.

Second, philosophers have argued that violent protest may aim at effective public communication with officials and public audiences about imminent or ongoing injustices. Jennifer Kling and Megan Mitchell (2019, 3) argue that "violent protest may sometimes be required to engage in meaningful, consistent public communication about injustice even in a generally just society." In particular, "violence is required for communication when it transmits a message about the nature of injustice that available forms of nonviolent protest are unable to send" (Kling and Mitchell 2019, 9). Moreover, Pasternak (2019, 394) argues that "through the resort to public acts of destruction and open confrontation with the police, rioters communicate anger toward that state and defiance of its political authority." In societies where democratic processes are marred by systemic political, cultural, and material marginalization and exclusion, this may constitute "a form of effective democratic participation" (Pasternak 2019, 396).

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[7] This conception of paradigmatic moral reasons is inspired by Wolf (2015), Frankfurt (1988), and Williams's (1985) characterizations of morality. While I do not ascribe to their moral/nonmoral distinction, their understanding of morality is an apt characterization of the source of paradigmatic moral reasons.

Third, philosophers have argued that violence may aim to defend or uphold moral principles of human dignity and equality. This is most vividly illustrated in Bernard Boxill's discussion of Frederick Douglass's fight with his enslaver, Covey. In his autobiographical narratives, Douglass ([1855] 2014, 197) writes that his fight with Covey had recalled to life his "crushed self-respect," adding that "a man, without force, is without the essential dignity of humanity." On Boxill's (2018, 65) analysis, Douglass believed that "human beings, including presumably slaves, cannot honor themselves unless they possess power or force" and that "the power or force necessary to gain self-respect was not merely the capacity to defend oneself, but also a willingness to do so." Boxill (2018, 76) contends that Douglass resolved to defend himself against the physical abuse inflicted on him by Covey "because he believed that his nature as a moral being required that he stand up for the principles of morality" which provided him with the right not to be physically abused. Not only did Douglass believe of himself that he had this right, but (as his fight with Covey shows) he was committed to showing his allegiance to those rights by "standing up for them and fighting for them when they are violated or even impugned" (Boxill 2018, 68).

In a similar vein, Margaret Betz (2020, 182) argues that resistance violence often serves as "an attempt by members of the targeted group to regain (or gain anew) their dignity and sense of self-worth." Discussing Nat Turner's violent insurrection, in which he led a group of slaves "from one white residence to another (sixteen in all) killing every white person in the house," Betz argues that in a context where one's dignity and fundamental right to defend oneself are constantly denied, "resistance violence restores that dignity" by proclaiming that one is entitled to protection (Betz 2020, 182).

Inciting changes in public policy, engaging in effective public communication, and defending human dignity and equality are undoubtedly noble and compelling aims. However, this does not necessarily make it morally permissible to use violence to achieve them. As Martin Luther King Jr. held, "Constructive ends can never give absolute moral justification to destructive means" (King 2015, 53). Indeed, philosophers and activists alike have provided numerous paradigmatic moral reasons *against* the use of violence, even when undertaken in the name of worthy moral goals, such as those previously discussed.

Martin Luther King Jr., for instance, emphasized the moral and practical risks of violence. He argued that violence tends to cause greater harm than nonviolence overall. Where nonviolent tactics may "bring about a transformation and change of heart" in the oppressor, violence "only multiplies the existence of violence and bitterness in the universe" (King 2015, 53). Similarly, Kimberley Brownlee (2004) notes several moral considerations against the use of violence, some of which she draws from the work of Joseph Raz (1979). First, violence causes direct harm to others, which nonviolence avoids. Second, violence—even when it is warranted—may "encourage violence in other situations where violence would be wrong" (Brownlee 2004, 350). Third, violence risks alienating potential allies by antagonizing them or distracting them from the moral aims those violent resisters are attempting to achieve. Fourth, violence risks "confirming the antipathy of opponents," potentially emboldening them or making them more reluctant to compromise or cooperate (Brownlee 2004, 350). Finally, violence may "give authorities an excuse to use violent countermeasures against dissenters," potentially causing greater harm overall (Brownlee 2004, 350). Although Brownlee contends that violence may be morally permitted in certain rare situations, given these risks, it should generally be avoided. If it is necessary, violence should be used "prudently, discriminately, and with great reluctance" (Brownlee 2004, 350).

Given the potential costs of violence, philosophers discuss several moral constraints on its use in resistance (particularly, in the form of violent protest and disobedience), many of which are drawn from the literature on just conduct in war. These constraints include necessity, proportionality, likelihood of success, and what I will call "fairness" (or, what is sometimes called the "innocent bystander exception" in the self-defense literature). Each one of these conditions, and their overall importance, is subject to intense debate, and I will not be able to provide a detailed analysis here. However, adopting definitions from the literature (especially from Pasternak's [2019] discussion), they can be roughly summed up as follows.

Necessity "requires that the harm inflicted on behalf of the just cause is the least harmful available means for doing so" (Pasternak 2019, 386). Moreover, as Candice Delmas (2018, 96) elaborates, "deadly force cannot be used preemptively or indiscriminately or in response to future probable threats. Nor can it be used as a form of payback after an attack." Success "requires that the resort to defensive harm will have a reasonable chance of successfully averting the attack" (Pasternak 2019, 386). Proportionality "requires that the defensive harm inflicted is proportionate to the harm it aims to avert" (Pasternak 2019, 386). Finally, the fairness requirement prohibits resisters from harming "innocent bystanders"—individuals who are not responsible for the injustice being resisted. As Kling and Mitchell helpfully explain, "Only when individuals have forfeited their rights to safety, security, and property, either through consent, or more commonly, through their responsibility for the injustice at issue, do they become liable to attack. Innocent bystanders, by definition, are not responsible for any wrongdoing, and so are not liable to be attacked, even by people acting in their own defense" (Kling and Mitchell 2019, 21).[8]

The foregoing discussion surveyed several paradigmatic moral reasons for and against the use of violence in resistance. To briefly recap, paradigmatic moral reasons arise from impartial principles of justice and morality. They are characteristically impartial and agent-neutral, applying to individuals in virtue of their shared moral status, independently of any special traits or qualities. Moreover, they are centrally concerned with protecting and promoting (or at least refraining from impinging on) the equally weighted needs and interests of others in society. With this conception of paradigmatic moral reasons ready at hand, we are now in a good position to consider another category of reasons that is usefully contrasted with paradigmatic moral reasons—one that is differentiated from paradigmatic moral reasons on the basis of partiality.

4. Personal Reasons and Violent Resistance

Paradigmatic moral reasons for (and against) the use of violence, such as those previously discussed, undoubtedly provide some of the most important considerations when deliberating about violent resistance. However, they are not the only considerations that may be relevant to such deliberations. As Harry Frankfurt (1988) and Susan Wolf (2015) contend, alongside impartial aims and principles, many of us are also committed to our personal projects, to certain individuals and groups, or to various ideals that have authority over us but that are neither impartial nor paradigmatically moral. For instance, we may care about "being steadfastly loyal to a family tradition, or selflessly pursuing mathematical truth, or devoting oneself to some type of connoisseurship" (Frankfurt 1988, 258).

Thus, independently of paradigmatic moral reasons, there are also what I will call *personal reasons* for engaging in violent resistance. Personal reasons arise from individuals' commitments to their personal projects and relationships. In contrast with paradigmatic moral reasons, they are centrally concerned with protecting and promoting the resister's own special desires and interests or those of the people with whom they stand in personal relationships of love or loyalty. Thus, personal reasons are characteristically partial and agent-relative. They apply to individuals in virtue of special engagements and commitments which they may not share with others and which may not be reasonably expected of everyone. The well-being of one's child, the call to continue a family legacy, or the desire to take revenge or cause the suffering of an enemy are all examples of personal reasons. Although some authors have argued that such reasons are not "moral" but instead represent a category of "nonmoral" values, I will not make such an assumption here. The distinction between paradigmatic moral reasons and personal reasons need not hinge on whether the latter category is genuinely "moral." Instead, what draws personal reasons apart from paradigmatic moral reasons is their personal and partial nature in contrast with impartial concerns for human equality or the common good.[9] Moreover, whereas paradigmatic moral reasons are by definition prima facie moral, personal reasons may or may not cohere with impartial morality. In some cases, such as when they take the form of a desire to cause the suffering of an enemy or to take revenge, they may be, at the very least, morally questionable.

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[8] For defenses of the innocent bystander exception see especially Thomson (1991), Nagel (1972), and McMahan (2009).

Personal reasons are well represented in the testimonies and narratives of individuals who engage in violent resistance. In what follows, I will illustrate such reasons via three examples. To be clear, these examples are meant to illustrate how violent resistance may be undertaken primarily for personal reasons which differ substantially from, and cannot entirely be reduced to, the paradigmatic moral considerations discussed earlier. They illustrate the different kinds of personal reasons that may motivate and count in favor of violent resistance. My intention is not to argue that these are cases of unjustified or immoral violent resistance. The question of the overall moral status of these cases remains open for discussion.

The first is the case of Margaret Garner. Garner and her family escaped slavery by traveling across the frozen Ohio River to Cincinnati in the winter of 1856. They were later apprehended by US Marshals acting under the Fugitive Slave Act of 1850. Rather than give her back to slavery, Garner killed her two-year-old daughter with a butcher knife. She wounded two of her other children, preparing to kill them too, before she was subdued. According to an 1856 article by P. S. Bassett, an abolitionist Baptist minister who visited Garner in jail,

> She said, that when the officers and slave-hunters came to the house in which they were concealed, she caught a shovel and struck two of her children on the head, and then took a knife and cut the throat of the third, and tried to kill the other—that if they had given her time, she would have killed them all—that with regard to herself, she cared

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[9] This leaves open the possibility that there may be partial moral reasons—i.e., moral reasons that arise from relationships of love or partiality. However, when I refer to paradigmatic moral reasons in this paper, I will only be referring to impartial moral reasons.

> but little; but she was unwilling to have her children suffer as she had done.
>
> I inquired if she was not excited almost to madness when she committed the act. No, she replied, I was as cool as I now am; and would much rather kill them at once, and thus end their sufferings, than have them back to slavery, and be murdered piece-meal. . . .
>
> . . . She alludes to the child that she killed as being free from all trouble and sorrow, with a degree of satisfaction that almost chills the blood in one's veins; yet she evidently possesses all the passionate tenderness of a mother's love (Bassett 1856).

It is important to note that Garner was not merely acting to defend her child. Historians argue that infanticide among enslaved women in pre-Civil War America was a form of resistance to slavery through which women seized control over their children's fates and harmed slaveholders. As Allain (2014, 2) writes,

> By killing their infants, enslaved women denied slave owners the bodies that slavery required to function. . . .
>
> . . . Individual cases of infanticide resulted from a combination of both insurrectionary and altruistic aims, not merely one or the other. Indeed, resistance and altruism are not mutually exclusive; slave women who killed their children might have done so with the dual intentions of resisting slaveholder authority and protecting their children.

Indeed, there is evidence that slaveowners in the United States "saw slave infanticide as a form of robbery" (Allain 2014, 2). Moreover, slavery dissolved kinship ties, destroyed parental rights, and alienated individuals from their blood relatives: "Slave women who committed infanticide thus resisted slaveholder hegemony by laying claim on their own children over their master's claim" and asserting their power over their children's fate (2). For such reasons, I consider Garner's infanticide to be an act of violent resistance against slavery, even if it might have also been a defense against harms to her children. (As I noted in section 2, in certain cases there might not be a sharp distinction between violent resistance and self-defense, especially under conditions of slavery.)

Let us now turn to the reasons in favor of Garner's action. Bassett's article makes it very clear that Garner's violent resistance was not the result of a bout of madness or irrationality. Rather, it was done soberly, for reasons of maternal love which Garner continued to stand by well after the incident. As she stated in their conversation, Garner was not willing to allow her children to go through the horrors she had experienced under slavery. Moreover, she was not willing to allow slaveholders to determine their fate. Her maternal love, which included a desire to determine her own children's destiny and end their suffering by whatever means necessary, provided a personal reason to engage in violent resistance.

Garner's violent resistance was undertaken for reasons of maternal love. However, personal reasons may also arise from an agent's attachments to a project that is important to her but is banned or discouraged by her oppression. A particularly striking case is that of Adrienne Bennett, the first black woman master plumber in North America. Bennett—who is now the CEO of her own contracting company—was subjected to constant sexual harassment from her all-male colleagues during her five-year union plumbing apprenticeship in the 1980s. They did everything they could to sabotage her work. As she stated in an interview with PBS, "Like the women before me, they wanted me to leave" (Solomon and Koromvokis 2021). One day, Bennett decided to resist by physically assaulting a man who groped her. She describes the incident as follows:

> By this time, I was so tired of them putting their hands on me, I grabbed a pipe wrench out of my tool belt. . . . I came down on the top of his hardhat. And I said: "It stops today. You pass the word. The next fucker that puts their hands on me will die, and I will go to prison happily." (Solomon and Koromvokis 2021)[10]

In interviews, Bennett describes the resistance she engaged in during this time as stemming from her dedication to achieving her dream of being successful in her career. As she states, "I was not going to let myself . . . down. . . . I'm honest, hardworking, and I don't let anyone get in my way and cheat me out of my dream" (Kavilanz 2018). Indeed, as she reports, her act of violent resistance helped her to complete her apprenticeship and put a stop to the harassment she was receiving. As she put it, "I didn't have any problems after that" alluding to the fact that her act of violence allowed her to shift the balance of power to her advantage. Bennett's story suggests that among the reasons for assaulting the man who harassed her—striking him as he was walking away, breaking his hard hat in two and nearly killing him—were strong personal reasons arising from her loyalty to herself and to the career that she had devoted her life to.

In addition to love for another person (as in the case of Garner) and devotion to one's success in a vocation (as in the case of Bennett), attachment to an idea or personal mission can also provide reason for engaging in violent resistance. For a final case, consider an incident from the life of Egyptian feminist writer and activist Mona Eltahawy. Eltahawy has been sexually harassed on numerous occasions, including once while on a religious pilgrimage and once when she was just a child. In the past, Eltahawy tended to turn the other cheek. Now in her fifties, she has started to respond more aggressively. On one notable occasion, Eltahawy beat up a man who groped her on the dance floor by pushing him to the ground, sitting on top of him, and punching him repeatedly in the face (Eltahawy 2021). Describing the reasons for her violence, Eltahawy emphasizes that she wanted to make the man fear her and to make him feel the consequences of his misogynistic acts.

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[10] In a similar NowThis News (2019) video, Bennett added, "I literally split that hard hat in half. I could have killed him. I didn't have any problems after that."

> It had been a long time since I had experienced as much clarity as I did in those moments. . . . I was done with men and their fucking hands. . . .
>
> Unlike in 1982, when I had frozen and burst into tears, I found my assaulter and I punched and I punched. (Eltahawy 2021)

Elsewhere, she elaborated,

> I wanted him to remember that this average-height woman, whose ass he believed he could just reach out and grope without fear of retaliation, beat the fuck out of him. (Eltahawy 2019, 142)

In recent writings, Eltahawy declares it her personal mission to terrify the patriarchy (*Albawaba News* 2020). In particular, she wants the men who dare to harass or subordinate her to fear that there will be consequences for their actions and to know that she is both willing and able to dole out those consequences herself, specifically in the form of violence. As she writes, she wanted the man who groped her to "remember her as the harbinger of more rage and punches to come" (Eltahawy 2021). In her recent book *The Seven Necessary Sins for Women and Girls*, Eltahawy (2019, 143) demands that we "push beyond self-defense as the only acceptable way for women to respond to patriarchal violence." She offers violence—a tool of control which, as she states, women are regularly subjected to but always denied—as one of the means through which women are able to incite fear in misogynists. Elaborating in interviews she states, "I'm serving patriarchy. I'm putting it on notice that I'm here to terrify you. The patriarchy should be terrified because I'm here to fuck you over" (*Albawaba News* 2020).[11] Thus I suggest that among Eltahawy's reasons for beating up the man who groped her were personal reasons arising from her personal mission to terrify misogynists and to make them suffer for their abuses against her.

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[11] Eltahawy also says this in the CBC Radio (2019) story, "I Want Patriarchy to Fear Women."

The foregoing cases illustrate some of the personal reasons that may be involved in deliberations about violent resistance. Such reasons differ from paradigmatic moral reasons due to their personal and partial nature and their explicit focus on an agent's special projects and relationships. It is for *her* family, *her* vocation, *her* personal goals, *her* empowerment, that the agent acts when she acts on a personal reason. It is not for the good of all persons considered equally and impartially nor for the good of oneself understood as one person among others equally deserving of respect and well-being.

5. Violent Resistance as Radical Choice

What are we to make of the cases in the previous section, and how does the foregoing discussion affect the way we should think about and evaluate violent resistance? Certainly, this does not provide an answer as to whether such actions are, all things considered, morally justifiable. Even if we accept that such actions violate paradigmatic moral restrictions, there may be other ways of accounting for their moral value. Instead of considering such alternatives or attempting to reach a moral verdict on these cases here, I want to make a general point about violent resistance that is suggested by the discussion so far. Namely, accepting the distinction between paradigmatic moral reasons and personal reasons allows us to recognize that conflicts may arise between such reasons in practical deliberations. That is, when deliberating about whether to engage in violent resistance, there may be tensions between what one has personal reasons to do and what one has paradigmatic moral reasons to do.

To see what I mean, it is helpful to consider a similar conflict that Susan Wolf discusses outside the context of oppression. In what Wolf calls situations of "radical choice," there is "a conflict *between* [impartial] morality and the demands of [personal] love [and loyalty]" (Wolf 2015, 42). Moral considerations point the agent in one direction, while personal reasons point her in the opposite way. Importantly, when such conflicts arise, it is not obvious what the all-things-considered best course of action is for the agent. Acting according to impartial morality would require betraying something she loves or is loyal to. However, acting on personal reasons would require violating impartial moral principles. Thus, for Wolf, situations of radical choice are situations in which one faces the problem of weighing two incommensurable values against each other. Whatever one chooses to do, the choice is "radical" in the sense that it is a choice to act in favor of something of significant value at the cost of something else of significant value.

Wolf illustrates radical choice with the example of a loving mother whose son has committed a serious crime and who must decide whether to report him or to hide him from the police: "He will suffer gravely should he be caught, but unless he is caught, another innocent man will be wrongly convicted for the crime and imprisoned" (Wolf 2015, 41). From the point of view of impartial morality, the mother is morally obligated to turn in her son. However, the mother's love urges her to disregard this consideration and to hide her son from the police instead. The circumstances thus create a special practical dilemma for the mother, with reasons of maternal love and reasons of impartial morality pulling her in opposite directions.

Regardless of what we think the mother ultimately *should* do (a point over which there may be reasonable disagreement), it is important to recognize that the stakes are quite high for her. The problem she faces does not permit an easy answer. Since her identity and the meaning of her life are so intimately connected with her son's, turning him in to the police would be personally devastating. It would mean acting disloyally to her child, whom she loves dearly, and allowing him to be subjected to great (even if justified) harm. Not only would her child suffer in prison, but the mother's own life (and presumably the life of her entire family) would be significantly changed if he were convicted and taken away. On the other hand, hiding her son from the police is no less difficult a choice. She would be committing a serious moral wrong. Standard moral theories may conceive of the wrongness of such an action in different ways. On one conception, lying to the police and the victims of her son's crime amounts to treating them as mere means to her own ends, failing to respect them as her equals. On another conception, the consequences of this act explain its wrongness. Hiding her son from the police would effectively ruin an innocent man's life, along with the life of his family, without any contribution to the common good. Her guilty son would evade responsibility for his wrongs, perhaps even getting away with further injustices. Regardless of how we conceive of the wrongness of such an action, impartial morality seems to count strongly against it.

Wolf's discussion of radical choice is useful in understanding the ethical complexities involved in violent resistance. Namely, we should recognize that when deliberating about whether to engage in violent resistance, victims of oppression may have to make difficult choices, much like the mother's in Wolf's illustration. The decision to engage in (or refrain from) violent resistance may constitute a kind of radical choice in which one must decide between conflicting personal and impartial considerations.[12] Conflicts of radical choice may take at least two different forms. In some cases, personal reasons may point in favor of violent resistance while paradigmatic moral reasons urge against it. Consider, for instance, Eltahawy's case. Her personal commitment to terrifying misogynists pulled her to use excessive force against a man who groped her on the dance floor. Impartial reasons such as necessity and proportionality, however, seem to urge restraint from such extreme behavior. There may be other cases, however, where paradigmatic moral reasons favor violent resistance while personal reasons urge restraint. Consider, for instance, someone living under colonial rule who must decide whether to fight a colonizer or to hold back and care for an elderly parent with a terminal illness. Paradigmatic moral reasons pertaining to the greater good may pull him to fight, where familial love and loyalty may urge him to stay home.

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[12] It is important to note that one can face a radical choice even if one has not gone through a conscious process of weighing and balancing different reasons against each other. To see what I mean, consider the notion of normative reasons assumed in this paper (which is the notion also used by Wolf [2015] and Williams [1981], as well as Manne [2014]). Namely, a normative reason for someone to perform an action is a consideration that counts in favor of that action and that would be apt to cite when reasoning with her about what to do. Such reasons bear some relation to the agent's

Importantly, unlike Wolf's radical choice, the notion of radical choice for my purposes is not one in which "it is *morality itself* . . . that stands on one side of the dilemma" and nonmoral value that stands on the other side (Wolf 2015, 42; emphasis added). This is because I have not defined paradigmatic moral reasons and personal reasons in terms of the distinction between moral and nonmoral values. Rather, the distinction between paradigmatic moral reasons and personal reasons hinges on the partiality of the latter and the impartiality of the former. Thus, where Wolf's conception of radical choice illustrates "the problem of whether to attend ultimately to moral concerns at all" (Wolf 2015, 42), the conception of radical choice I am using illustrates the problem of whether to attend ultimately to impartial considerations when deliberating about how to resist one's oppression.

Returning to the cases from the previous section, we can identify tensions between paradigmatic moral restrictions on violent resistance and what the agent had reason to do from the point of view of her personal projects. Garner's love for her children provided her with a personal reason to seize control over their fate and prevent them from leading dismal lives of slavery. However, a typical standard from the perspective of impartial morality has it that every human being has an inalienable right to life.[13] On this view, paradigmatic moral reasons would urge Garner to refrain from committing violence against her children. Ending her children's suffering,

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desires and values. However, they need not be considerations of which the agent is necessarily aware. One may be mistaken about the reasons that she has for acting, and she can come to learn about her reasons through conversation with others.

[13] For instance, in the *Second Treatise of Government,* John Locke ([1690] 1980) argues that the right to life is the most basic human law of nature and that human beings have both a right and a duty to protect it. Moreover, according to Article 3 of the United Nations Universal Declaration of Human Rights, "Everyone has the right to life, liberty and security of person" (UN General Assembly, A/RES/3/217 A, Dec. 10, 1948, https://www.un.org/en/about-us/universal-declaration-of-human-rights).

however, was far more important to Garner than honoring this right. Moreover, Bennett and Eltahawy both had personal reasons to physically assault the men who sexually harassed them, Bennett's having to do with her devotion to her career and Eltahawy's having to do with her personal mission to terrify misogynists. However, impartial considerations of necessity and proportionality may provide both with reasons to refrain from the kind of extreme violence they undertook. Nevertheless, for both women, honoring their personal goals and aspirations mattered more than adhering to these impartial restrictions. Thus, each of the previous cases seems to involve a kind of radical choice where personal reasons urge the resister to engage in violent resistance while impartial reasons provide grounds for exercising restraint.

However, it is worth noting an important difference between the context of radical choice in Wolf's example and the contexts of radical choice in the cases presented in section 3 of this paper. That is, the reason why the agent's options are limited in Wolf's case is importantly different from the reason why Garner, Bennett, and Eltahawy's options are limited. In Wolf's case, the mother's ability to fulfill her personal values (i.e., her love for her son) is constrained due to her son's criminal behavior, thus placing her in the circumstances of radical choice. This is not because of her oppression or any injustice that has been done to her but rather because of an injustice committed by her son. The mother's choice regarding her son is certainly difficult, but this is a tragic situation that could befall anyone regardless of race, class, or gender; it is not forced upon her as a result of being a victim of oppression. (That said, there are, of course, ways of filling out the details of the case on which oppression may be relevant. It is fair to assume, however, that such a filling out of the details was not intended by Wolf in her essay).

By contrast, the cases of Garner, Bennett, and Eltahawy are contexts where oppression severely limits one's options, including the kinds of resistance available to them. That is, racism, classism, and sexism largely explain why violence has become one of their few relevant options, especially if they are not willing to passively comply with their oppression. In Garner's case, it is because escaping slavery was not an option for her and her family that she had to consider killing her children to protect them from it instead. In Bennett's case, it is because there were no effective resources in her workplace to deal with sexual assault that she had to resort to violent means to end harassment from her colleagues. In Eltahawy's case, it is in part because there are no serious social or legal repercussions for sexual harassment that a violent response became a live option for her. Were it not for their oppression, such radical options would neither be relevant nor worth considering. As a result of their oppression, and the severe limitations it places on the ways in which they can adequately resist, violence becomes a live option, thus placing them in the circumstances of radical choice.

How should we judge people who engage in violent resistance when it is not supported by impartial reasons? Although it is not my aim in this paper to defend a particular response to this question, I will briefly sketch three natural possibilities that arise from the conflict in reasons I've highlighted throughout.[14]

First, one may hold that the strength of the impartial reasons in such cases simply trumps any of the personal reasons that have been under discussion in this paper. On such a view, acts of violence that violate impartial moral restrictions are ultimately unjustified.

Second, one might take a stance that is radically skeptical of impartial moral restrictions in such cases—for instance, by saying that the personal reasons of those who are severely oppressed always bear greater weight than impartial reasons. On this alternative view, acts of violence that go against one's personal values are ultimately unreasonable, overly self-sacrificial, or self-abnegating.

Third, one might take inspiration from Wolf's discussion of the criminal's mother. On such a view, there is no simple way of resolving conflicts between impartial reasons and personal reasons in the context of radical choice. That is, there is no single metric according to which impartial reasons may be ranked more highly than personal reasons, or vice versa. Instead, we should be sympathetic with someone who decides to fulfill their personal values by acting violently, even if we should also grant that they have gone against important moral demands—just as Wolf (2015, 41) contends that the criminal's mother at the very least "deserves our sympathy." What's more, regardless of what we think a person in the context of radical choice should do, we ought to acknowledge that "there is something positively reasonable (and not just understandable)" about someone who fulfills their personal values rather than simply acting in accordance with impartial morality (Wolf 2015, 41). A natural extension of Wolf's view would have it that victims of oppression facing such circumstances likewise deserve our sympathy. Violent resisters are not necessarily engaged in reckless or irrational acts of destruction. Rather, they may be acting to defend or maintain their personal values. Far from being worthless, such actions may be integral to victims' integrity, self-worth, and meaning in life under oppressive conditions.[15] At the same time, we might still consider their actions to be morally questionable or ambiguous.[16] Moral evaluations of such cases do not settle the question of their ethical value (at least not without further argument).

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[14] Although I will present the answers below as very general answers to all cases of violent resistance and radical choice, it would be open to someone to take more specific attitudes to particular cases. For instance, one might be inclined toward the view that impartial morality trumps personal reasons *in the case of Margaret Garner* but that personal reasons carry greater weight than impartial morality *in the case of Adrienne Bennett.* However, since I am merely sketching the most natural responses below, these distinctions will not be crucial in the discussion that follows.

Wolf's view about radical choice may be even more compelling in the cases considered throughout this paper for the following reason: the circumstances of radical choice are foisted on them by their oppression—a fact about their life which is completely beyond their or their loved ones' control—thus making a response of sympathy yet more appropriate. Although the mother in Wolf's example committed no injustice herself, her son did, and this is what placed her in the context of radical choice. By contrast Garner, Bennett, and Eltahawy were each forced into a position of radical choice as a result of systemic oppression. Neither their own actions nor the actions of any of their loved ones led to this. Since the adversity they face is arguably more tragic and arbitrary, it is not unreasonable to have greater sympathy for them than for nonoppressed agents facing radical decisions like the criminal's mother.

As it turns out, however, agents of violent resistance are often unfairly or too quickly judged. It is not uncommon for onlookers to hastily moralize, infantilize, or discount their behavior. Far from helping us to better understand or to eliminate the circumstances that give rise to violence, such attitudes only multiply the oppression of the resisters. This may occur in various ways. For instance, since (as many philosophers argue) violent resistance may be an act of communication, dismissing it as the result of adolescent recklessness may itself be a form of epistemic injustice. Uncareful moralizing of the actions of the oppressed can lead to stereotyping, victim-blaming, or the imposition of unrealistic or overly burdensome expectations. Moreover, excessive preoccupation with moral praise or blame can distract from understanding the underlying causes and effects of oppression and from properly supporting those who struggle, often imperfectly, to resist.

It has not been my aim here to provide a moral or ethical verdict on violent resistance, nor has it been my aim to discourage others from making such judgements. Rather, I have been focused on describing two different kinds of normative reasons that can weigh in favor of (or against) violent resistance and considering how such reasons may interact in practical deliberations. How we ultimately ought to evaluate violent resistance along moral or ethical lines requires more discussion than can be provided here.

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[15] This is especially true provided that, as Williams notes, an agent may be so identified with her projects that she takes them "seriously at the deepest level, as what [her] life is about" (Smart and Williams 1973, 156).

[16] For discussion of the absence of nuanced thinking about violent resistance, the misguided tendency to jump to final moral verdicts, and the morally ambiguous nature of such actions, see Rini (2020).

6. Conclusion

Recall the opening question of the paper: for victims of oppression, what reasons may stand in favor of (or against) engaging in some form of violent resistance? I argued that we can differentiate two kinds of reasons: paradigmatic moral reasons, arising from commitments to impartial moral values and principles, and personal reasons, arising from attachments of love and loyalty to specific people, projects, and personal values. Ideally, when deliberating about violent resistance, both reasons cohere. But there is no guarantee that conflicts will not arise. Thus, some acts of violent resistance may take the form of a radical choice in which paradigmatic moral reasons and personal reasons pull the agent in opposite directions. Recognizing that violent resistance may involve deliberating under circumstances of radical choice allows us to have greater sympathy with people who are pushed to such extreme forms of resistance. Moreover, it opens up the possibility that such actions may have personal value, independently of how they measure up from the point of view of impartiality.

To be very clear, it was not my aim here to endorse violent resistance either in general or in any particular case. Instead, I have made the much weaker point that some of the normative considerations that go into the balance when deliberating about whether to engage in violent resistance are personal reasons, and that such reasons are not guaranteed to cohere with the paradigmatic reasons of impartial morality. Nor was it my aim to simplify our understanding of the reasons that bear relevantly in deliberations about violent resistance or to provide a way of resolving conflicts of radical choice that may arise in such deliberations. Instead, I have focused on drawing out some of the ethical complexities that are involved in violent resistance. By centering these complexities in the conversation about (non)violence, my hope is to enhance our understanding of violent resistance and the people who engage in it.[17]

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